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# The Linguistic Diversity of Mountain Jews in Azerbaijan. The Judeo-Tat Language in the Regional Linguistic Context

## Abstract

Mountain Jews are one of the many ethnic groups that currently inhabit Azerbaijan. The largest centres of this community are the cities of Baku and Oghuz (formerly Vartashen) and the village of Krasnaya Sloboda in Quba District. The uniqueness of the Jewish community in the Caucasus lies primarily in the specificity of its culture, traditions and customs, which for many years were influenced by close contacts with other ethnic groups living in the Caucasus. Despite belonging to the same ethnic group with its own language (the Judeo-Tat language), Mountain Jews in Azerbaijan communicate in different languages. This article aims to show the linguistic diversity among Mountain Jews in Azerbaijan. Additionally, it presents the roles and significance of the Judeo-Tat language compared to those of other languages in the region.

**Keywords:** Mountain Jews; Azerbaijan; Judeo-Tat language; Caucasus

## 1 Introduction

The second largest Jewish community in Azerbaijan after Ashkenazi Jews are Mountain Jews. Mountain Jews call themselves *Juhuri*, from the word *Juhud* or Jew. The main centres of population of Mountain Jews are Baku and the suburb of Krasnaya Sloboda within the Quba District. The smallest community of Mountain Jews can be found in Oghuz, formerly known as Vartashen. In addition, Mountain Jews used to inhabit the historic region of Shirvan, specifically the village of Myudzhukhefteran, now located in the Ismayilli District. Mountain Jews from Azerbaijan are characterized by their close contacts with Caucasian peoples. Co-existence with various religions such as Zoroastrianism, Islam, and Christianity has influenced the community's present form of Judaism, its culture, and its language. The original language of Mountain Jews is Judeo-Tat, known among the Jewish community as *Juhuri* or *Jurri*. Mountain Jews now speak different languages, depending on their place of residence. Additionally, there is much controversy regarding the origin of Mountain Jews and Judeo-Tat. The main polemical issue pertaining to the Jewish community in the Caucasus is their close kinship with the Tats, an Iranian people living in the same territory. Tats communicate in the Tat language, which belongs to the southwestern group of Iranian languages. Due to their linguistic closeness and their uncertain history, Mountain Jews are often referred to as Tats who profess Judaism. For these reasons, the aim of this article is to draw attention to the linguistic specificity of Mountain Jews living in Azerbaijan. The paper highlights a research gap regarding multilingualism in Azerbaijan's Jewish community which was discovered while studying the literature on the language issue of Mountain Jews. In addition, the article presents the specificity and problems of the language of Mountain Jews, Judeo-Tat, and its position in comparison with other languages in the region.

## 2 Methodology

Apart from linguistic aspects, the article also covers historical and socio-cultural themes. Therefore, the main research instrument applied for the purposes of the article is the use of the analysis method. The analysis is based on literature, scientific articles and journalistic reporting, as well as information gathered from online platforms, which currently seem to be the most up-to-date sources of information about the linguistic situation of Mountain Jews. To this date, no field research has been conducted on the multilingualism of the Jewish community in Azerbaijan. Earlier research has focused on Judeo-Tat and linguistic similarities between the Tats community and the Mountain Jews. There is a research gap regarding the linguistic issue among Azerbaijan's Mountain Jews themselves, which was noticed by the author on the basis of an analysis of selected sources. The chosen methodology draws attention to the new research sector concerning the linguistic situation of Mountain Jews in Azerbaijan and aims to show the need to conduct field research in order to fully describe the research problem.

## 3 Linguistic Diversity

Just as Mountain Jews can be distinguished from Ashkenazi Jews or Georgian Jews, there are also distinctions among Mountain Jews themselves in Azerbaijan. Currently, Mountain Jews can be divided into three groups – Mountain Jews from Quba (Northern Azerbaijan), Jews from Oghuz, and Jews from Baku (Bram, 2018, pp. 611–612). Shirvan Jews living in the present Ismayilli District could also be added to this group, yet their current numbers are infinitesimal. Although the differences between Jewish communities were already noticeable in the Soviet era, divergence intensified significantly with increased urbanization and the gaining of independence by Azerbaijan in 1991.

The main distinguishing feature between the three Jewish groups is the sociolinguistic aspect. Currently, Mountain Jews from Quba District, living in the suburb of Krasnaya Slodoba, can be associated with the primary language, Judeo-Tat. The Jewish community from Baku speaks mostly Russian, while Jews from Oghuz use the Armenian and Udi languages. Jews from Shirvan use Azerbaijani.

The phenomenon of multilingualism has always been a hallmark of Jewish communities and the Mountain Jews community in the Caucasus is no exception, largely due to the abundance of languages found in the Caucasus region. Similarly to other Jewish communities, the functions of liturgical language and literature were mostly performed by Hebrew, whereas regional languages and Judeo-Tat served as the languages of communication. In general, Jewish communities usually spoke different languages, although in some territories dominant languages prevailed over others. This was especially the case in Azerbaijan, where the main language tended to dominate. Mountain Jews were fluent in the languages of the surrounding peoples: Turkish / Azerbaijani in Shirvan and Derbent, and Armenian or Udi in Vartashen (Oghuz) (Begun et al., 1999, p. 361).

To quote B. Miller: *All Tat Jews of the Azerbaijan SSR speak both Turkish and Russian. Some of the Jews of Vartashen (today's Oghuz) living among the Armenians and Udis also know the languages of these peoples: 60% of them speak Armenian, while 10% speak Udi.* (Miller, 1929, p. 18)

By the end of the Soviet era, Judeo-Tat gradually began to disappear in favour of Russian (Bram, 2018, p. 612). This phenomenon was especially visible in Baku, but also in the Quba District and Oghuz. At that time, the Azerbaijani language, perceived as the language of inter-ethnic communication, began to play a dominant role in the territory of Shirvan. During Soviet rule, Judeo-Tat was most common in the Quba District, maintaining strong relations with the Jews of Derbent, where newspapers and literature in this language were published.

The process of deepening linguistic differences and the disappearance of Judeo-Tat intensified with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of independent Azerbaijan. The role of

the Azerbaijani language increased while Russian, which was widespread in Soviet times, became the language of the intelligentsia. Emigration of Russian-speakers has become an additional factor of this phenomenon. As a result, Azerbaijani has become as popular as Russian, even in Baku.

## 4 The Judeo-Tat Language

### 4.1 Problematic Aspects of Judeo-Tat

Judeo-Tat (*Juhuri*), similarly to Tat, belongs to the southwestern group of Iranian languages. Two Russian researchers, Davydova and Grjunberg, define the Jewish variant of the Tat language as “northern” and the Muslim variant as “southern” (Griunberg & Davidova, 1982, p. 231). Judeo-Tat can be divided into three basic dialects: Kaytagski, which includes the dialects of the towns and villages of the North Caucasus, Derbendi, spoken by the inhabitants of Derbent and the surrounding area, and Qubei, spoken in Krasnaya Sloboda in the Quba District. Additionally, the Vartasheni (Oghuzki) dialect, used by Jews in the north-eastern part of Azerbaijan, is sometimes distinguished (Begun et al., 1999, p. 361). In Soviet times, representatives of the Mountain Jew community recognized the Derbendi dialect as the main literary canon. This decision resulted from the fact that Derbent was inhabited by the largest population of Mountain Jews at that time. However, the Derbendi dialect was not imposed on the representatives of other dialects.

The languages most similar to both Tat and Judeo-Tat are the Persian and Tajik languages. Tat itself is most closely related to Persian. According to researchers who adhere to the two-language classification, the grammatical structure of Judeo-Tat retains some features that have been ousted from Persian and as a result it seems more archaic. Moreover, the lexical differences between Judeo-Tat and Persian are much greater than in the case of Tat. Linguistic differences between Tat and Judeo-Tat also appear in proper speech, which makes it impossible for the representatives of both ethnic groups to understand each other fully (Nazarova, 1996, p. 120). To some extent, Tat dialects bear Turkish features, as exemplified by the influence of Azerbaijani on the phonetics and grammar of the Tats inhabiting Azerbaijan (Nazarova, 1996, pp. 120–121). On the other hand, many borrowings from Hebrew may be observed in Judeo-Tat. For example, most Mountain Jews’ names are of Hebrew origin, such as Mamre, Aminadav and Nahshon for boys and Avigayil, Osnat and Sarah for girls (*Otryvki*, 2017). Hebrew words acquired a slightly different meaning in Judeo-Tat. For example, *tembel* is “lazy” instead of “stupid” and *gubri* is “important person” instead of “hero” (Manoakh, 1984, p. 91). In addition, B. B. Manoakh notes that some phrases in Judeo-Tat have a structure that is characteristic of the Hebrew language, rather than Persian dialects. For example, the expression *Yerushalaim en Surhi* (literally “Jerusalem with gold”) has the meaning “Jerusalem of gold”, as in the Hebrew *Yerushalayim Shel Zahav* (heb. *זהב של ירושלים*) (Manoakh, 1984, p. 91). Some supporters of the theory of the similarity between the two branches argue that the Hebrew influence on Judeo-Tat may only be seen in religious vocabulary, which was adopted under the influence of religious practice. Defenders of the two language version emphasize that before Mountain Jews entered the Caucasus, Hebrew had been superseded by Aramaic. In Palestine, Jews converted to Aramaic around the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC, and in Babylon or Iran even slightly earlier. Therefore, it would be more appropriate to look for words of Aramaic origin rather than Hebrew in the language of Mountain Jews (Semenov, 1997, p. 8). Additionally, Judeo-Tat has also retained some phonemes that were present in ancient Hebrew but which have disappeared in modern Hebrew. Aramaic probably also influenced the principles of vocalization of Hebrew texts adopted among Mountain Jews. As a result, the Hebrew names of Caucasus Jews are pronounced in Aramaic. For example, Yusuf instead of Yosif, Devro instead of Dvoir, etc. (Semenov, 1997, p. 9). Furthermore, Judeo-Tat also contains many words from Hebrew with a non-religious meaning (Semenov, 1997, p. 7). For example, wishes, congratulations, and the phrase for “good luck” are derived from Hebrew.

According to other studies on the differences and similarities between Muslim Tats and Mountain Jews, the inhabitants of Krasnaya Sloboda declared that they could understand about 80%

of the Tat language (Clifton et al., 2005, p. 17). Interesting discrepancies in the responses about the degree of understanding of the Jews of Debrent may also be noted. On the basis of the above research, some scholars argue that despite the division of the Tat language into two varieties, both communities are able to understand each other. Moreover, similar differences existing between Judeo-Tat and Tat also occur between the Muslim varieties of Tat. The division of Tat may therefore seem groundless. On the other hand, it is generally accepted that sociological factors justify maintaining the division. Above all, Mountain Jews do not distinguish between Tat language varieties. Another factor may be the fact that Jews perceive their language as Judeo-Tat rather than Tat. Additionally, much of the observed dialect distinctness may actually stem from cultural and religious differences. As a consequence, the division of the varieties of Tat language and Judeo-Tat into two separate dialects seems justified, though perhaps more on a sociolinguistic basis than a purely linguistic one.

Another problematic issue is the question of the Judeo-Tat alphabet, as to date no uniform version has been established. Until 1929, Mountain Jews used the Hebrew alphabet with the addition of various characters that could not be written in Hebrew letters. In 1929, the Hebrew alphabet was replaced with Latin, very similar to the Latin alphabet devised for Azerbaijani. However, as a result of Sovietisation in 1938, different versions of the Cyrillic alphabet were introduced in the area of present-day Dagestan and Azerbaijan (Begun et al., 1999, p. 366). The creation of a unified alphabet system for Judeo-Tat is of particular importance today for preserving the language. In particular, a common alphabet would serve as an integrating factor for a nation scattered all over the world, which now speaks, writes and reads in different dialects and alphabets.

## 4.2 The Disappearance of Judeo-Tat

Until the Second World War, schools in Krasnaya Sloboda taught in Judeo-Tat, and therefore the oldest generation of Mountain Jews is still fluent in their native language. During the post-war period, due to the intensification of censorship and Sovietisation (Semenov, 2003), Russian became dominant in the former Soviet republics and gradually replaced the language of Mountain Jews. Judeo-Tat began to play a secondary role, mostly used only within families (Bram, 2008, pp. 338–339). As a consequence, most of the post-war generation does not remember or does not know the language of their ancestors at all. At present, Judeo-Tat is slowly dying out in the areas inhabited by Mountain Jews. UNESCO has classified it as an endangered language, thus including it in the *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger* (*Den' rodnogo iazyka*, 2015).

The main reasons for the disappearance of the language are a process of strong assimilation and a growing number of mixed marriages. Many Jewish families give up their linguistic tradition in favour of more prestigious languages or the official languages of particular countries (Russian, Azerbaijani, Hebrew). For example, in Krasnaya Sloboda Russian is still the dominant language, not Azerbaijani. The Quba District is the only place in Azerbaijan where Mountain Jews still cultivate Judeo-Tat. 89% of respondents in Krasnaya Sloboda named Judeo-Tat as their mother tongue and 59% of the survey participants declared that Judeo-Tat is for them the easiest way of communication (Clifton et al., 2005, p. 22). Different phonetics, a sophisticated system of verb conjugations, a lack of “canonical” grammar, the number of dialects, and the lack of generally accepted graphics are all factors which complicate the language learning process and may hinder its further development. Judeo-Tat is especially popular among emigrants from Azerbaijan. A Mountain Jews Writers' Union operates in Israel with the aim of protecting the literary version of the language of their ancestors, similarly to the Rambam Theatre, which stages all performances exclusively in Judeo-Tat. What is more, some organizations, such as the STMEGI foundation,<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> STMEGI is an international foundation established in 2001. It is one of the first and largest non-profit public Mountain Jews' organisations with headquarters in Russia. For more details see: <https://stmegi.com/fund/about/> (*Mezhdunarodnyĭ blagotvoritel'nyĭ fond STMĖGI*, n.d.).

are active in preserving Judeo-Tat. Their activities include making films on language research, publishing books, and offering widely accessible language lessons (Mordekhaev, 2012).

## 5 Summary


The issue of the origin of Judeo-Tat raises many questions about the credibility and entitlement to be considered Jewish. All Oriental Jews, including Mountain Jews, are examples of Jewish communities which, unlike other branches of Jews, are assimilated in their countries of residence. The best example of this assimilation being the language they use. Mountain Jews in Azerbaijan, influenced by the local peoples inhabiting the area, have acquired many new customs and have adopted regional languages. Three groups of Mountain Jews can currently be distinguished in Azerbaijan, mainly characterized by their use of different languages of communication. In addition, the Mountain Jews community can be defined as a multilingual group which knows other popular languages in the region, in addition to its own language. However, no research has been done on this topic, in particular on the ongoing processes of globalization and it is therefore not possible to refer to specific linguistic examples of multilingualism among Mountain Jews in Azerbaijan in the article. Nevertheless, the article draws attention to the need for research. The Mountain Jews' Judeo-Tat (*Juhuri*) language is worthy of study, being the language still used by the inhabitants of Krasnaya Sloboda. Under the influence of Russification during the Soviet era and the later domination of Azerbaijani, Judeo-Tat is now disappearing. Today, the main cause of language extinction is the attractiveness of other languages, such as Russian, the knowledge of which brings better employment prospects and enables one to go to Russia in search of work.

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